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ABSTRACT

Reflecting some of the emerging issues sustaining debate in secondary school literature instruction and writing instruction, this newsletter presents articles that discuss the impact of E. D. Hirsch's book "Cultural Literacy," "authentic discourse," and collaborative classroom research. Articles in the newsletter are: "Rethinking Literature" (Anne Turnbaugh Lockwood); "Beyond Filling in the Blanks" (Martin Nystrand); and "Two Teachers Talk" (Anne Trunbaugh Lockwood). A one-page commentary called "Reconsidering the Classroom's Role," by Kent D. Peterson, institutional director, is also included. A list of current literature titles that may be used as supplementary texts in classes comprised of youth from diverse backgrounds and achievement patterns, and a selected bibliography for educators interested in writing instruction and literature instruction are attached. (RS)

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Focus on Change

ED 366 976

Authentic Writing & Literature Instruction

What are some of the current issues sustaining debate in literature instruction and writing instruction? Certainly a key topic is what type of curriculum and instruction in reading and literature, especially at the secondary level, would best engage youth from low socioeconomic backgrounds and diverse racial and ethnic origins, some of whom may have histories of low achievement in school.

With any consideration of this topic, many controversial questions immediately arise. Does the mandated, traditional curriculum or canon of works adequately engage students of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds in schoolwork? How may students from widely diverse backgrounds, some with a pattern of school failure, learn to invest themselves in a traditional school experience from which they stand apart as spectators? How can teachers shift instructional approaches from a teacher-centered position as content authority to a student-centered, empowered classroom? Would it be sensible for teachers and curriculum coordinators to select literary texts to which students might connect on a personal basis? Or do such choices strand students outside mainstream society?

In this newsletter, we reflect on some of these emerging issues and narrow our focus to secondary schools. George Newell, an associate professor of English education at Ohio State University, who has worked extensively with secondary school practitioners, speaks about the importance of the publication of E. D. Hirsch's controversial book, *Cultural Literacy*, and the impact the book has had on literature instruction and the field of English education in general.

He points to the "fascinating paradox" that has developed between writing instruction and literature instruction. As he explains, in the last decade writing instruction has focused on the writing process and is student-centered, whereas literature instruction stems from a tradition of the teacher firmly entrenched as content authority—and just as staunchly established as a third party, standing *between* the student and the work of literature or text being studied. Newell suggests some ways that teachers may begin to rethink the teaching of literature toward a more student-centered approach. In addition, teachers may be particularly interested in his suggested exercise, "Teaching with Guided Response to a Literary Text."

Martin Nystrand, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and principal investigator at the OERI Center on Restructuring and Organization of Schools, discusses what he terms "authentic discourse"—explaining how authentic curricular practices that extend to writing, reading, and talk can engage students in literature instruction and writing instruction. Nystrand speaks not only from the standpoint of his own research in secondary schools, but also from his personal experiences as a high school teacher of multicultural youth.

We also hear the voices of two teachers who have worked collaboratively with researchers in their classrooms. Both have given careful thought to ways in which writing instruction and literature instruction can be personalized and focused on the student in order to engage him or her more fully in authentic classroom tasks.

Both have worked to establish a sense of community in classrooms of students from diverse backgrounds. Each has grappled with a mandated curriculum that may not be attuned to the needs of minority youth who may also have a history of low achievement in school. In their work, they have struggled to find solutions to some thorny issues.

Finally, we include a list of current literature titles that may be used as supplementary texts in classes comprised of youth from diverse backgrounds and achievement patterns, and a selected bibliography for educators interested in writing instruction and literature instruction. ■

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"Over time I began to sense that I could teach in ways that would include their interests and values..."

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Rethinking Literature

George Newell is Associate Professor of English Education at Ohio State University. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from Stanford University where he worked with Arthur Applebee on the National Study of Secondary School Writing. His current research interests include investigating writing instruction and literature instruction, especially the kinds of instructional support teachers provide, and assessing the knowledge and skills that result. In our conversation, Newell spoke about the resurgence of interest in literature instruction at the secondary level, supports that teachers need to change instruction, and the current tension between literature instruction and writing instruction.

The energy George Newell communicates as he discusses some of the key issues confronting English education communicates his own fascination with what he describes as a relatively recent rethinking of writing instruction and literature instruction. A researcher and teacher educator who has worked extensively with practitioners, Newell begins by placing some major issues in an historical context and by describing a fundamental tension in English education.

"During the last twenty years, a text-centered approach to the teaching of literature became the conventional wisdom. What that means is that teachers at the secondary level have assumed that the meaning resides in the text and that their job as teachers is to lead students toward a particular meaning. On the other hand, writing instruction has begun to move to more student-centered, process-oriented approaches."

Newell states that this leads to a "fascinating paradox" between the teaching of writing and the teaching of literature.

"In literature instruction, there is a tradition of a text- and teacher-centered approach. However, in the teaching of writing, which in the past decade has focused on the writing process, the writer constructs his or her meaning while composing and discovers a way to represent what has been discovered.

"That means that writing instruction has been very student-centered, very discovery-oriented, based upon constructivist theories of learning, whereas literature instruction has been extremely text-centered and teacher-centered, based upon memory and rote approaches to learning. This has resulted in a very real tension that needs to be addressed."

The publication of E. D. Hirsch's book, *Cultural Literacy*, marked a turning point for the fields of English education and literacy research, Newell attests. What led to the realization that literature instruction needed rethinking? Though a combination of factors contributed to the need to rethink literature instruction, Newell discussed one influence to illustrate how this important discussion began.

"In the years before the publication of Hirsch's book," Newell says, "people in the fields of English education and literacy research were concerned mainly with writing, focusing on how instruction can support students in the development of writing skills. They saw the process-oriented approach to writing instruction as the key."

Why was the process-oriented approach so central? "With the process-oriented approach, the student attains some degree of ownership over a topic," Newell explains, "and makes the topic his or her own, developing his or her own particular way of presenting ideas, information, and experience. This brought a remarkable change to the role of writing in schools, and highlighted the centrality of the learner in our teaching.

"Though often harshly criticized for an emphasis on memorization of facts, the publication of *Cultural Literacy* is important because Hirsch also talked about the need to begin to think about the *content*, the cultural literacy content of schooling. He argued that educators had been particularly neglectful of the content of literature and history, which together make up what he calls the humanities."

Hirsch also argued against a purely skills approach to reading and writing. Newell elaborates, "He pointed out that it wasn't just reading or writing processes that would make a difference, but whether one knew something about the content that one was writing or reading about."

Hirsch's argument has affected researchers, who are now rethinking the role of writing instruction in schools as well as how literature instruction should be approached. In one sense, Hirsch initiated a much-needed debate.

"People who were doing work in writing and learning were comfortable with Hirsch's argument about the need for background knowledge, but in the field of English education, a lot of literacy researchers remain uncomfortable with his notion of a set canon of works that need to be read in history and literature."

Nonetheless, Newell maintains that Hirsch's argument—which was echoed by Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*—had

a beneficial result on the field of English education. "It spawned serious debate among people in English education at almost all levels. We found that, in general, there was a concern about what students know about literature and history, and suddenly there was a surge of interest in literature again."

Typical Literature Instruction at the Secondary Level

Does text- and teacher-centered literature instruction engage students fully? "Researchers, myself included," Newell responds, "have been finding that what teachers end up doing is talking about a text for a class period or two, and leading discussions about that text in which they direct students toward a certain interpretation. Often they will assign a piece of analytic writing that may at first look like analysis, but if you talk to students they perceive it as a test of recalling or summarizing what the teacher has already said. For students, writing about literature often leaves little room for their own analyses."

Literature instruction is rooted in a different tradition than writing instruction, Newell says, and that is one reason it has remained teacher-centered. "One of the reasons we were able to make changes in writing instruction is that we didn't know much about the writing process and teachers were not receiving particular training in it.

"But in regard to literature, most English teachers come from literature backgrounds and pride themselves on being experts on literature. It is much more difficult for teachers to change the way they teach literature because they are carrying around some of the baggage from a long-standing tradition."

He adds thoughtfully, "It's important to understand teachers' experiences and beliefs if you want to foster change."

Obstacles to Change

Newell is sympathetic to the difficulties English teachers confront when trying to effect lasting instructional change. "One problem with change is that even the most traditional approaches to literature and writing instruction bring a kind of stability and coherence to the curriculum," he remarks.

"You can make the argument that text-centered approaches to literature exist because that's the way teachers know how to do it. To simply change overnight and go to a more reader-centered approach creates a certain degree of dissonance and confusion. Change is difficult, and teachers have to be carefully supported through any efforts to change."

Support for Teachers

What sorts of support should English teachers who want to effect change ideally receive? Newell replies by pointing to typical problems confronted by schools.

"One of the things that became very evident in Applebee's case studies of 17 different schools (*see "For Further Reading"*) is that some of the schools included in the sample were experiencing really horrific economic problems. Teachers didn't have enough books for their kids. In some cases, kids only had access to anthologies and were tied to limited sets of books and plays. They had no video equipment that might be used to supplement or support literature instruction, and in some cases there were problems with censorship. Teachers also reported having limited opportunity and time for planning as a department.

"When there was lack of support for the teaching of literature and lack of support for materials with which to teach literature, those particular concerns became the center of everything for teachers. In other schools where there was support and materials for the teaching of literature, teachers took a great deal of pride and joy in their teaching. So the issue of support is absolutely critical.

"Another important aspect of support is to provide opportunities for teachers to think about and to plan what to do with students who find reading literature distasteful. At present there is a lot of evidence that the successes in lower-track literature classrooms are based upon individual teachers trying to figure out what to do.

"Presently, we have no coherent systematic way of thinking about what to do with literature instruction in lower-track classes. English departments are not rewarded and don't feel the pride and joy in the successes of those classes as they do with AP classes, for example. So another form of support teachers need is time and funds to solve the problems of literature instruction with lower-track classes."

Shifting From Text- and Teacher-centered Instruction

What sorts of solutions may be effective if a teacher wants to shift from a text- and teacher-centered approach to literature instruction? Newell immediately points to *The Scarlet Letter*, "a text that has been part of the canon for high school literature for a long time. One question that tends to come up is why Hester never leaves the village—why she stays and takes all the abuse she does. A traditional teacher-centered way of dealing with that question might be to simply tell students what the teacher has read about it and his or her opinions.

"But there is another approach to it. You could pose the question, 'Why doesn't Hester leave? Why does she stay?' You can simply pose that question and have students write about it for a while.

"The value of that is that students, as individuals, all have a chance to think through that particular question and after they have formulated something, a discussion could begin about what they have decided Hester's reasons are.

"That type of writing makes a very powerful contribution to a discussion in that individuals have first formulated something on their own, whereas in an oral discussion of that issue, maybe not everyone would have a chance to talk and time to reflect on such a complex issue."

The Multicultural Classroom Context

Will a more student-centered approach to literature instruction help teachers who teach a diverse student population? "One thing students bring from different cultures is a different set of expectations, values, and points of view," Newell replies. "That means that the kind of interpretive community that develops in those sorts of classrooms could be much more varied and possibly much richer.

"However, one thing that becomes more than a little problematic is not only the types of text that we introduce into multicultural classrooms, but the types of discussions and kinds of ways we have students think about texts. It seems that this is probably another argument for more reader-response-oriented instruction where kids are able to talk about what they've begun to make sense of."

Newell believes that it is imperative for educators to respond more fully to students who bring diverse ethnicities and achievement patterns to the classroom. "Although I am not equating multiculturalism with lower-track classes, it is very clear that we find, especially in urban situations, students from different cultures and different ethnicities in lower-track classes. It is very obvious that these kids are put off by school. They are disenfranchised by school-sponsored

Teaching with Guided Response to a Literary Text

1 Select a poem or short story that you think your students would enjoy. Carefully read it yourself to unpack your own responses to the text. As you are reading the text, write down the thoughts you have as you are reading it. This will help you to sort out how you felt and what you thought about as you read the text. Note what you struggled with and also what difficulties students may encounter.

2 Next, think about what kind of discussion your students are going to need for this particular text, what kind of background information they have to start with, and which parts may cause trouble.

3 Consider what kinds of activities you are going to initiate in order to engage the kids in reading the text. How will you start the lesson? Will you begin by asking students about experiences related to what is represented in the text? Will you give some background information if you know that they are not going to know something about the culture or the ideas represented in the text?

4 Ask students to read the text, and immediately afterwards, have them write down their first thoughts about it. After they write their responses, use what they have written to begin a discussion.

5 In your discussion, you might begin by asking: "How does the poem or story remind you of anything that you have done or of people you have known?" The point is to set up a process-oriented approach to reading as you might a process-oriented approach to writing. As you engage students in the activities and as they read and re-read the text, keep in mind that you are supporting them in constructing and shaping their understanding of the text.

6 Finally, think about parts of the exercise that went well and the parts that need to be worked on again. It is most important that you look at what the students were able to do with just a degree of guidance from you. Consider strategies that may nudge them deeper into their own understanding of the text.

—*George Newell*

ways to talk about text, so there are probably going to have to be a different range of possibilities as to how you might respond to a text."

The "Good" Literature Class

How might a teacher approach a heterogeneous class or a lower-track class comprised of students from different ethnicities and cultures? Newell's answer is thoughtful.

"A good literature class has a range of reading experiences that provide different kinds of writing and discussion. One is that there is a set of texts that all students in the class read. That results in a communal sharing of the text, and those texts could be not only the more canonized texts that populate our classrooms, but also texts from the various cultures that are represented by the students in the classroom.

"A teacher might create his or her own classroom library of texts that would represent the different cultures in the classroom that students could pick up and read.

Shifting toward a more open-ended view of literature instruction is aligned with the true nature of literature, Newell claims. "People forget that we are talking about literature, not about scientific reports or historical documents. That we have to settle on one specific interpretation of a poem, short story, novel, or whatever the text happens to be, is a specious kind of argument."

Although much has been learned about placing the student at the center of teaching, many issues, such as the role of the teacher in literature instruction, still require considerable rethinking. Newell concludes, "It is critical that the teacher shift from being just a dispenser of information to a facilitator who recasts and builds upon students' ideas and interpretations."

Beyond Filling in the Blanks

Martin Nystrand is professor of English at the University of Wisconsin and principal investigator for the OERI Center on Restructuring and Organization of Schools. His research focuses on instruction by looking at how the writing, reading, and talk that high school students are involved in effects their learning. He is especially interested in what he terms "authentic discourse," which he discusses in this article.

Martin Nystrand, whose experiences as a high school English teacher have influenced his present research, believes in the importance of building a sense of community in secondary-level English classrooms through what he calls "authentic discourse"—or writing, reading, and talk that is authentic, a concept he quickly defines.

"If a teacher asks an authentic question, it is a question to which the teacher is not looking for a particular answer. An authentic question has no prespecified answer."

He elaborates, "For example, it might be a question of opinion, such as 'What did you think of the movie you saw? What did you think of the game last night? Were you surprised at how Chapter 3 ended when you read it last night for homework? What do you think will happen in Chapter 4?' These are all authentic questions because the teacher in each case can't know the answer."

Why is it important for teachers to ask authentic questions? What do they accomplish? Nystrand explains, "First, they manifest the teacher's expressed interest in what students think and provide an opportunity for students to put forth and express their own views and ideas. In other words, when teachers do this, the classroom is transformed into a forum for students' ideas. It really gives students the floor.

"The opposite of an authentic question is a test question, and teachers typically ask test questions in recitation, when they check to make sure students know the answers to particular items. With test questions, the focus is on what somebody else thinks, and whether or not the students have learned it. In other words, the emphasis is on someone else's information. By contrast, the focus of authentic questions is on students' ideas and on what they think is important."

How should teachers handle purely factual information? Is there a way to approach it through authentic questions? Nystrand's answer is definite. "Yes, and I don't mean to suggest that teachers should never ask test questions, because they must. But often the same objectives covered by recitation, such as making sure students understand complicated concepts, are frequently achieved best through authentic questions or through lessons that involve authentic questions."

Authentic Literature and Writing Instruction

Nystrand gives some examples. "I think of a lesson I was looking at from data that we collected over the last four years on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The teacher wanted to talk about racism in the novel. One way to talk about racism would be for the teacher to discuss it in a lecture.

"Another way to look at racism in *Huck Finn* would be for the teacher to ask a tight set of ques-

tions that elicit information about particular scenes in the novel itself and then make the point herself or himself. In effect, when the teacher does that—and it's a very common practice—it's the oral equivalent of short-answer questions and filling in blanks. The teacher basically says everything but pauses occasionally for the students to fill in a key word or two.

"But in the particular lesson I looked at, the teacher asked the students to think of as many scenes as they could from *Huckleberry Finn* that seemed to have something racist occurring in them. Her questions were authentic, she gave students quite a bit of latitude in this case, and they were very forthcoming.

"Students came up with nearly a dozen examples, and as each student gave an example, the teacher asked for an elaboration so the student would have to explain what was racist about it. Hence, even though in this lesson the teacher was teaching something about racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, she gave the students room to talk about racism in their own terms. As a result, it was a very good lesson because the students did a lot more than just fill in the blanks."

Writing assignments can be approached similarly, Nystrand maintains. "Many, if not most writing assignments in school are comparable to filling in the blanks. They may require more writing than that, but they're often short-answer exercises. On tests, for example, students typically have to demonstrate they know particular things, rather than work out their own ideas using other people's ideas as sources.

"I think one way teachers can promote challenging and stimulating writing assignments is by asking students to write in response to authentic questions and assignments. They can ask students' opinions, particularly on things they've read, they can ask them to compare characters in plots in ways that might be novel, and they can ask them to make inferences about characters, plots, and themes. Especially important is asking students to write in response to stories and novels as the story unfolds for them—speculating, for example, about the meaning of events in the narrative, as well as how the story might end—and not just upon completion of the work."

Nystrand says that any problems teachers might confront in grading students' responses of this sort are compensated by other sorts of rewards. "The answers might be unpredictable, but the teacher's professional life becomes a little more interesting."

Teachers' professional growth is an important benefit that stems from the use of authentic discourse, although they must have some supports in place in order to be effective.

Support for Teachers

Both inservice and preservice help teachers succeed with authentic discourse. "If they're teaching literature, they have to have some background in literature so that they feel comfortable with the kinds of unpredictable responses that students might make. It's safe to ask test questions, because teachers know the answers, and in a sense they can keep students on a very tight leash."

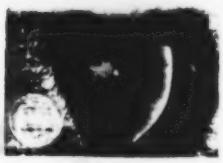
At the secondary level, teachers can experience difficulties when they relinquish the traditional role of content authority. "They have to be comfortable talking about literature and have a fairly in-depth understanding themselves of the works they're teaching. Obviously they must have more than a superficial understanding of it."

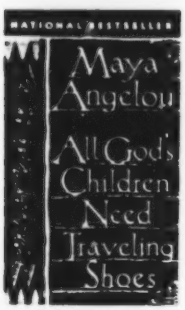
But rewards for teachers can be substantial, Nystrand asserts. "Rewards are particularly important for teachers in large schools with large loads. There's nothing more deadly than teaching the same lesson several times on the same day, trying to cover the same things. Eventually the teacher—like the students—tunes out, having a hard time distinguishing one class from another."

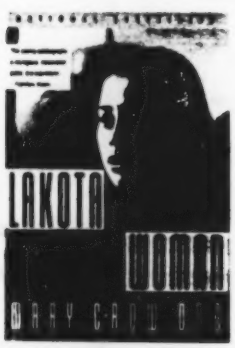
If teachers are to engage their students in authentic discourse, with its many attendant unpredictabilities and therefore risks, Nystrand says they are most likely to succeed when their school and department promotes student-centered learning. "It all depends on what the department's idea of curriculum is. If the department's idea of curriculum is a tight one and demands that lots of things have to be covered, teachers don't have much latitude to ask many questions with unpredictable answers. Teachers are more likely to engage in authentic discourse when they have some autonomy in choosing texts, and if not the actual texts, at least the methods they use to teach them. In effect, if teachers are to ask authentic questions, then department chairs and principals have to make authentic requests of teachers as well. It works from the top down."

Implications for Multicultural Classrooms

Does authentic discourse have special implications for classrooms with students from different ethnicities and cultures? Nystrand pauses. "Well, schools are a reflection of the greater society. To the extent that suburbs have more resources than cities, then often superior teaching and greater achievement goes on in suburbs rather than cities. So to some extent, it's a manifestation







The Changing Face of Young Adult Literature

A walk through a bookstore reveals cultural diversity in book titles that we would not have seen twenty-five years ago. Although the Center does not recommend individual texts for classroom use, below we list some selection tools for teachers' use in choosing literature for supplementary classroom use.

A Sampler of Selection Tools:

Abrahamson, R. F., & Carter, B. (Eds.). (1988). *Books for you: A booklist for senior high students.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. *—Annotated, organized by subject, listing fiction and non-fiction titles.*

Donelson, K. L., & Nilsen, A. P. (1989). Literature for today's young adults. 3rd Edition. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman. *—Contains a section on judging young adult books, an extensive bibliography, and an appendix on selection guides.*

M. S. Frankson. (1990, January). Chicano literature for young adults: An annotated bibliography. *The English Journal,* 30-38.

Kruse, G. M., & Horning, K. T. 1991. *Multicultural literature for children and young adults: A selected listing of books 1980-1990 by and about people of color.* Madison, WI: Cooperative Children's Book Center, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison & Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction. *—$5 within Wisconsin, $10 outside, from: Publication Sales, Wisconsin Dept. of Public Instruction, P.O. Box 7841, Madison, WI 53701.*

McBride, W. G. (Ed.). (1990). *High interest—easy reading: A booklist for junior and senior high school students.* 6th Edition. Urbana, IL: NCTE. *—Organized by subject and annotated.*

New York Public Library Office of Young Adult Services. (1990). *Celebrating the Dream. —A bibliography featuring the African-American experience through literature, with brief annotations. $5 plus handling fee from: The New York Public Library, 455 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016.)*

of the greater society and the limited opportunities that minorities have had and continue to have."

Teachers facing multicultural classrooms obviously confront special challenges. Nystrand explains, "One important factor is that the classroom has a great diversity of learners in it from many backgrounds. Therefore the teacher has to think very carefully and creatively about what sorts of writing assignments to give that can somehow allow all students to play a full role in the classroom and not leave some on the periphery." In other words, a key first task is to establish a classroom community that provides full membership for each student.

One example is the range of literature titles from which the teacher may choose. "The teacher has a tremendous range of books from which to choose. I think, for example, of Sally Hinton's *The Outsiders,* which is a novel about a group of teenagers who are members of a gang."

Writing assignments can help build a sense of community in a diverse classroom. "One kind of writing that helps a lot of students who might be insecure about their status in the classroom, whether or not they're mainstream, is journals. Journals basically invite students to tell teachers what's important to them and put students and their values and ideas in the center. They make them feel important, and are a very good way to include all students."

Nystrand points to other types of helpful writing assignments. "An assignment that's very useful for students who are from very different backgrounds is small-group work where students have to collaborate on tasks. I think, for example, of a ninth grade class I once taught with

students from many different backgrounds. We were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I had my students work in groups and write a brief script of the jury room scene in which the jury deliberated the guilt or innocence of Tom Robinson.

"That's a nice assignment, because everybody knows the verdict: he's guilty. They also know all the circumstances leading up to the trial, but they *don't* know what the jury members say in their deliberations. In order to create a good script, the students have to consider everything they know about the people who are on the jury, and they have to discuss everything they know about the town, the attitudes of people, and the times. This assignment helped them understand the novel, and it helped them work together."

Nystrand believes that other authentic assignments can be tailored to the needs of a class, such as a class that has a diverse student population. "Once I had an entire class—which was multicultural—brainstorm on the most important problem in the country at the time. They picked things like gun control, drugs, abortion, and homelessness.

"I insisted that they rank each of these problems and agree on the rankings. Of course, they couldn't agree; they had a very heated debate. I might add, these were very reluctant learners, so I was very happy to have them have a very heated debate. The period ended with some students arguing for gun control as the most important issue and others arguing for something else. At the end of the day I knew which students were going to be in the gun control group, the drugs group, and so on, and when they came to class the next time, I put them into those groups and gave them a set of writing assignments.

"One assignment was to write a letter to a public official who might be able to do something about the problem. In their letters, they had to explain the problem and propose a solution. They also had to write a short play script in which they created a dramatic incident that illustrated the problem. They had to write a newspaper editorial, and they had to work collaboratively. I was very pleased with the results."

Nystrand says that his own teaching experiences at the high school level inspired his more authentic, student-centered approach to English instruction. "I was a new teacher, and I inherited particular approaches. I became frustrated, however, because I didn't think my students were responding as well as they could. Over time I began to sense that I could teach in ways that would, as a result, include their interests and values, and that I would be more successful."

He remembers one particular episode as especially effective with a class of ninth graders. "I was teaching a language unit that involved grammar and language study. Without planning to do so, the class and I started talking about their slang. As they spoke, I was impressed with how much more verbal they became. This was obviously a topic that interested them, and they had some expertise that I hadn't seen before.

"That evening for their homework, I asked them to list all the words in their vocabulary that were not in their parents' or teachers' vocabulary." He laughs. "The list was huge! I then took the lists and copied the words onto 5 by 8 cards. I had dittoed the cards with blanks for the word, definitions, parts of speech, etymology, and usage.

"I passed out the cards, and for the next few class periods they filled in the blanks, but these were very different blanks from the other blanks they had been filling in. These were authentic blanks. They now had a lot of expertise to contribute. When they completed their work, I typed all the cards into a 10-page 'Hiptionary,' which we read and discussed to see what their language could tell us about them.

"Suddenly a part of their experience was important and took on legitimacy in the classroom. For usage, they had to decide whether the words were standard or obsolete slang or archaic. They learned grammar, they used some fairly technical terms like etymology, and I thought they emerged from the experience with a new appreciation for language."

Nystrand adds, "I later tried the same assignment on my honors students. Not surprisingly, they didn't have as many slang words in their vocabularies, and I even had one student who refused to do the assignment on the grounds that he would be embarrassed to admit that he knew any slang.

"I then did a little empirical study correlating the number of words that students had on their lists with their previous grades in English. There I found a very strong negative correlation. The more words they had, the harder time they had in English."

He concludes thoughtfully: "This was very instructive to me as a beginning teacher, very eye-opening. Many students are not verbal in ways that schools count or value. For these reasons, I think it is important to find ways to bring students' experience into the classroom, and there is burgeoning interest in doing so."

Note: Martin Nystrand and Adam Gamoran were Co-Principal Investigators for the OERI National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, 1985-90.

"I can't change their environment.
I can't give them money.
I can't adopt them...
but I can teach them."

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Two Teachers Talk

Both Chris Gibson and Judy Johnson, the teachers interviewed in the following article, have opened their classrooms to researchers. Johnson participated in research with George Newell when he was on the faculty at the University of Kentucky; Gibson currently works with researchers from Ohio State University. Together, George Newell, Chris Gibson, and Judy Johnson are thinking carefully about ways to engage diverse youth in writing instruction and literature instruction.

In the first article, Chris Gibson, an English teacher and department chair at an inner-city high school in Columbus, Ohio, reflects on effective English instruction, especially in low-track classes, along with the challenge of teaching students whose achievement in school has differed widely and who come from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Chris Gibson's speech has the precise, rounded vowels and clear consonants of a person who loves the English language. The past five years, she has been an English teacher at Whetstone High School in Columbus, Ohio, which she describes as a totally different experience than the preceding five years she spent teaching at a Catholic school.

Whetstone is located in a predominately white neighborhood, but its student population of 629 students is approximately 49% African-American and 51% white. Not only racially diverse, the school services students from widely differing socioeconomic backgrounds.

Gibson explains, "The majority of students who are African-American are bused into our school, and come from a very poor area on the northeast side of Columbus. A lot of their families are welfare recipients; many of my students are on free and reduced lunch programs."

Her next sentence is succinct. "You could categorize many of my students as being at risk."

In contrast, her five years spent teaching in a Catholic school were less challenging. Gibson admits, "I became rather complacent. It is very easy to talk to white, middle-class, Catholic children who grew up in the area, whose parents grew up in the area, and who will probably raise families in the area."

Her arrival at Whetstone was difficult and exhilarating simultaneously, and she is candid about changes teachers must craft within themselves—changes that may effect long-held, even unconscious beliefs—when teaching a diverse population and when teaching students with widely varying achievement records.

"With one look in the classroom, the diversity smacks you in the face," Gibson explains. "You hear different dialects, see different colors, and very quickly are exposed to different cultures and different customs. Right away I had to do a lot of learning, accepting and"—she pauses—"appreciating and respecting students' differences."

In order to establish rapport with students, Gibson elected to work with the drill team and softball team "to get to know them and their families. I did this consciously, because sometimes in the classroom you see students 45 minutes a day, and if students have very severe attendance problems it's actually less than that. This is not long enough to get to know them, so sports seemed to be one avenue to accomplish that."

Can she give an example of learning to appreciate different cultures and customs? Gibson replies, "I'm an English teacher, and I realized I had this annoying habit of correcting students when they were speaking. But what I've learned is that we all switch registers when we talk. For instance, I speak differently to my principal than I do to my friends.

"I realized that if I stopped students to correct their grammar to standard American English, especially in a discussion, that sometimes I offended them, sometimes I stifled their discussion, sometimes I created hostility."

She sounds pensive when she continues. "I had to learn that I was not very respectful if I did not permit children to communicate in their own dialect."

Nonetheless, Gibson firmly believes that all students must learn—for their own eventual success and even survival in the workforce—standard American English. "I say to them, I realize this is the way you communicate in our class, which is fine. But when it comes to standard American English, this is a standard we have to use, this is a standard that is accepted."

How do students respond when she communicates the need to adhere to standard English in their writing and formal speech? Gibson admits she has experienced initial resistance. "They were very defensive. It's easier for me now, because I work with the students in many capacities. They know it's not a white-Black issue for me. But originally they would say I was trying to make them talk like the white man, and that they weren't going to change.

"Mostly I tell them that when they listen to the radio, read a magazine, or listen to the TV, there is a standard for speech. For

whatever reason—right or wrong, good or bad—when you encounter a future prospective employer, there is a standard, and he or she is going to expect that you know that standard."

She defuses possible defensiveness by telling students about her Italian grandmother, who was told to stop speaking Italian to her children because the teacher believed the children were confused. "If a teacher establishes a climate where these experiences can be discussed—and of course they contribute their own experiences—it's easier for them to accept what I'm saying about a standard and know it's not coming from a prejudiced or racist attitude."

Gibson comments that although the school is not formally tracked, students who receive lower grades usually end up in the same classes, classes that she opts to teach. Since many teachers prefer to teach students with higher grades and patterns of achievement, why does she choose to teach the less successful?

"Part of me," she reflects, "says these children need an education. That's the most I can give them. I can't change their environment. I can't give them money. I can't adopt them. I can't take them home with me and take care of their many, many needs.

"But I can teach them. And so, that's what I choose to do."

She compares the "Challenge" class she teaches, which has academically successful students in it, with her classes of at-risk students. "I have about 30 students in my Challenge class. The students have near-perfect attendance. Many of their parents are college-educated and have expectations that their children will go to college. Many students are involved in music and sports. Their parents come to the building, and if their grades start to fall, immediately you have a conference. So, teachers have that type of support."

By contrast, her other classes have the same curriculum, but more obstacles exist. "I reflect more on ways to help them. The curriculum is very difficult. The textbook is beyond most of their reading abilities, so we do a lot of reading aloud, and a lot of discussion. I've taught students in all my classes how to use the Macintosh; probably we're in the computer lab more than the other students."

She sees ways in which the curriculum could be aligned with students' varying backgrounds and cultural heritage, ways that would engage students in literature. "Right now we're working on a unit called 'American novelists in the early 1900s.' Yesterday one of my students asked when we were going to get to the Black authors. I said that was a good point, and I suggested they consider women authors as well. The novelists in our text are primarily white males.

"We read *The Great Gatsby*, but for many of them it was too difficult. However, this is a part of the curriculum I'm required to teach. If I had a choice, I'm not so sure I would teach *Gatsby*. I like it, but I'm not sure everyone needs to read it. We read it aloud and discussed it. I tried to give them some historical background before we started reading the text."

However, despite a mandated curriculum, students are provided some choices, which Gibson believes is important. "They can choose another novel in addition to the reading for class, and can write about what they read in a variety of ways. Some want to do formal book reports. Others want to do oral presentations. I also give them a handout that lists four different ways of responding to the things they read."

Gibson also insists upon authentic questions and authentic classroom discussions. "I try to stay away from literal questions. I'm really insulted by them, so I assume that they must be insulted by them too. I try to get them to tell me what they *think*."

She says that one frustrating barrier she must overcome is an attitude students occasionally display that she calls, " 'Tell us what you want.' This is what I fight a lot, that attitude. It's as if they're saying, 'Why don't you ask questions like other teachers? Because if you do, I can tell you the characters and the title and what happened in Chapter 9. But why do you ask what we think and how we feel and what I would do if I were this character?' "

Interestingly, Gibson reveals that her more academically successful students are the most resistant to authentic instruction. "They want specifics, definite rules. They're successful partially because they've learned to play the game. The kids who haven't been so successful are less resistant."

But even though Gibson feels constrained by the mandated curriculum, she is a self-confessed "purist." She speaks about it thoughtfully. "I believe there are great works of literature and I hope that some day our children will read and appreciate them, like I did and continue to do. But when you're working with children who are reading at a fourth, fifth, or sixth grade level, I want them to *read*. I want them to love to sit down and read a book, for that to be something they would do on their own, not just in school.

"If I really want that, I can't hand them a book that's beyond their level of reading and comprehension, that they have no"—she emphasizes—"*interest* in, no *connection* to. There is great

literature, contemporary literature that I could be using. I would rather be using that."

She gives the example of *Kaffir Boy*, by Mark Mathbane, an autobiography about South Africa. "The kids could not put it down. They were carrying it in the halls, teachers said they were reading it in their classes. South Africa and poverty are real issues for them. They could identify with the text, they had emotions about it."

Gibson was delighted, and shared her reactions with her students. "You're feeling something! That's what I want. I don't want you sitting here being passive and being little receptacles that I fill up."

Another very tangible means for students to gain a sense of pride in their accomplishments is the maintenance of a portfolio of their writing from the beginning to the end of the year. Gibson does this in all her classes. "I can say to other teachers and to my principal, this is where John was at the beginning of the year. He couldn't write a sentence. This is where he is now. This is all the proof I need that these students are successful. And for them, it's a visible sign every day when they walk in the room and open their folders and see stacks of papers."

Above all, Gibson would not exchange the diversity of her present classes for her previous teaching experience. "I'm not always successful," she relates. "I have students who fail, more than I want to see fail. But I have to try!

"I've taught college classes. I've taught upper-grade classes. I've said to myself, these kids are great! But they don't *need* me. They're going to be successful, whereas not everyone wants to work with this other group of kids. I really enjoy them, though, because we *are* so diverse and we have such exciting discussions."

Next, Judy Johnson, an English teacher at Lafayette High School in Lexington, Kentucky, discusses ways that teachers of low-achieving youth can build a sense of community through literature instruction and writing instruction as well as stretch the mandated curriculum to meet students' needs.

Growing Diversity and Polarization

Lafayette High School is one of five high schools in Lexington, Kentucky, and although it is not as racially diverse as Whetstone High School, its minority population—primarily African-American but also comprised of some Asian and Middle Eastern students—numbers approximately 13% of the total student population of about 1670. Recently the district changed from junior high schools to middle schools—an event that has occasioned considerable stress for staff. During the 1990-91 academic year Lafayette incorporated ninth grade students for the first time; an additional stressor on staff has been the high, and seemingly inexplicable failure rate for ninth graders across the board.

Johnson, a pleasant woman with a disarmingly candid manner, explains that when the district shifted to middle schools, the area was redistricted, causing most of the city's lowest socioeconomic group to be assigned to Lafayette. Although Lafayette used to be a neighborhood high school, its population is becoming more economically polarized.

Nearby, a new high school with a math and science technology magnet program is attracting a more affluent portion of the city's population as well as higher achievers. All these factors effect instruction at Lafayette, Johnson believes.

All classes at Lafayette are tracked, and Johnson teaches reading interpretation and advanced reading classes. In both classes, she prods students to write as frequently as possible, not just in analytic modes, but in more personal, experiential sorts of ways.

She claims it is easy to relate to the tension between writing instruction and literature instruction that Newell describes as a paradox in English education *(see first article)*.

"That tension does exist," she observes, "and there is also a tension between writing about literature analytically and writing about literature in personal sorts of ways. There are still teachers and theorists who believe that students must analyze various elements of a text, digging for the one true message—whatever that is—and that if you don't teach that way, you're not really teaching literature."

Obviously Johnson disagrees. "We have learned so much about taking kids through writing related to personal experience to get them to relate to characters, to relate to situations, to see situations the way a character might see them. Through these and other authentic writing activities, the text becomes much more real to them."

But in order to engage students in the array of writing activities that she espouses, barriers and potential obstacles that may exist in a racially and eonomically diverse class must be deflected. Therefore Johnson believes in beginning the school year or semester with a strong teacher emphasis on building a warm classroom environment, one in which students can find their individual voices.

Building a Sense of Community

"First of all, I have to build an environment where students know each other and each other's names, where they're willing to talk to each other and talk to me," she explains. "That's why the beginning of the school year or semester

with a new class is very important. Once I've built a positive environment, I can handle instruction, I can handle any kind of racial tensions, I can handle the youngster who finds out she's pregnant while the father's sitting across the classroom and they're not married."

In order to create an environment of trust, Johnson plays memory and association games with her class, "beginning ice-breaking kinds of things. I use as many opportunities as possible to get the kids to write and then read what they write. Of course, you have to deal with the fact that they don't want anyone else to hear what they've composed."

How does she push past that barrier? "I move from having them share things verbally to writing things that aren't threatening," Johnson answers, "and then I involve everybody in reading what they've written. Whatever comments I make at that point are always positive. They're not graded on the quality of what they do, just on doing the assignment."

Although Johnson hesitates to call her classes "multicultural," since the majority of students fall into two groups, affluent white youngsters or very economically deprived African-American youth, nonetheless she is challenged by their diversity. But their diversity often results in another barrier that must be overcome, the hurdle of student defensiveness.

"In terms of instruction," she explains, "when you have very vocal youngsters who are low-performing, they often try to throw the responsibility for their performance in school back at you. My choice of action is to try to deal with questions about grades or class standings in an open kind of way."

That is where the environment that she has carefully constructed at the beginning of the year or semester comes into play. Classroom activities are more student-centered than teacher-centered, helping both engage students and diminish any remaining obstacles to instruction and learning.

Personalizing the Mandated Curriculum

Johnson reads aloud to her students and also listens to them read to one another. Why? "The kids I teach, in general, aren't good readers. Something is triggered by hearing the words spoken without any slips or word substitutions. My students are also video generation kids, and it's very difficult for them to allow the written word to trigger the mental images that you and I have when we read. They can read a whole story and never visualize it. They can tell you the facts about it, but they didn't *see* it happen."

Just as Chris Gibson teaches a mandated curriculum at Whetstone High School that doesn't always match the needs of her students, so does Judy Johnson. "Texts are mandated by the district, but I also use others. For example, we have a class that's called Advanced Exposition. If you have truly advanced students, you should not be giving them just another composition class, but material they can really run with."

Another teacher teamed with Johnson, who took her daughter's college philosophy textbook, which was written in an unusual cartoon format, and paired it with Durant's *Story of Philosophy*. After an preliminary overview of different philosophers and ideas, each student was required to write a four-chapter version of his or her philosophy of life. Students were free to choose topics, but had to develop each one into a chapter and develop their own thoughts.

Such flexibility in the classroom stems from a personal desire to free students from factors that may inhibit writing. "We structure youngsters so that they get hamstrung," Johnson comments. "They can't write with a genuine voice, honestly and creatively."

Johnson resists the role of content authority that many of her peers in high schools have assumed. "Nuggets of wisdom come from the kids, not from the teacher," she muses. "When I have the least temptation to lecture, I can see the faces go blank, and the kids tune out."

Johnson admits to being a risk-taker in the classroom, because, as she discloses, "I used to try to do all the things the anthology book wanted teachers to do, but I just couldn't stick to teaching the straight elements."

Instead, her emphasis on writing has propelled her students into an array of writing activities that emphasize the student—obituaries written for characters and students alike, news accounts of a text, Valentines sent from one character in a story to another, and poetry.

"I work with poetry a lot because the kids are afraid of it or say they absolutely hate it." How does she succeed, given such barriers? "I give them lots of examples and a lot of freedom to write things in poetic form. They don't even realize they're working in poetic form, and have success so quickly that it becomes a really good tool for them to use in different situations."

After describing all the problems that teachers must overcome when teaching low-track classes or classes that reflect increasingly diverse students, Johnson concludes that teaching literature and writing is actually rather simple.

"We put kids into all sorts of little boxes," she reflects. "But really, all we want them to do is read, think, and then write about they've read and thought about. It's as simple as that."

■

Reconsidering the Classroom's Role

In the world of school change and improvement, focus is often placed on organizational issues such as instructional leadership, restructuring governance, and the clarity of a school's mission. As a result, the classroom and curricular considerations are often overlooked.

Recently, however, the publication of *Cultural Literacy* and *The Closing of the American Mind* prompted renewed interest in the content of curriculum and instruction. Moreover, while many of the correlates in the early Effective Schools Research focused on school-level features, educators and researchers now have added instructional practice and curriculum as another key element of any effective school (See Levine and Lezotte, 1990).

In this volume, we have read the stories of educators who are wrestling with the challenge of developing programs in writing and literature that serve a diverse population of students. Their stories highlight how educators develop new definitions of the properties of effective schools, fresh understandings of how leadership is enacted to improve schools, and innovative ideas on how to achieve both quality and equity in schools with diverse populations. Some selected issues of particular interest include:

• The definition of *"basic skills"* is constantly re-written as teachers (especially those in secondary settings) find that their students are more engaged, interested and connected to schooling when their work is more "authentic," when they actually read substantive work and deal with critical issues.

• *Instructional leadership is shared;* teachers as well as principals provide motivation, enthusiasm, ideas, and decisions that effect improvement and change. Shared instructional leadership goes beyond the catalytic support for change provided by a principal to the activities of teachers and staff.

Kent D. Peterson,
Director

• The notion of educational leadership, which used to mean programmatic administration and planning, now has broadened to include *intellectual leadership*. Intellectual leadership means that individuals are fostering more substantive discussions of ideas related to subject matter, instructional processes, and the purposes of education. We see intellectual leadership exemplified by teachers in the schools mentioned in this issue of *Focus in Change*, leadership that not only fosters greater achievement of students, but also enriches the intellectual lives of teachers.

• The issues raised in this volume also highlight the continuing debate about the *purpose of education*, especially education that seeks to provide both quality and equity for multicultural populations. Such debates are key if educators are going to find a successful mix of student outcomes, as well as an acceptable blend of mandated (or "suggested") curriculum and classroom autonomy so that teachers and students can shape activities around meaningful ends.

• Finally, through these rich descriptions we see the *challenge of school improvement*. Teaching is a very complex activity, especially when students are diverse in many ways. Curriculum design is not an exact science. Unlike the process that creates stainless steel, we cannot define the precise mix of ore, scrap, limestone and coke or the specific temperature and process necessary to make the crystals develop in a unique size and pattern. Sometimes we are fortunate when the heated discussion solidifies rather than fragments the class. Making schools better requires sharing norms and assumptions about improvement, a culture of improvement that is found in some, but not all schools. By looking closely at just one subject, we see the complexities and challenges of transforming whole schools as well as individual classrooms.

Nonetheless, schools and classrooms can be transformed. School leaders, teachers, and policymakers will need to scrutinize broader, systemic change. Such change will need to consider the nature of school organization, the forms of leadership and governance, the underlying school culture, as well as the interrelationship of curriculum, instruction, and the composition of the student cohort. These changes will require the time, attention, and will to look closely at all aspects of school and the resources and support to make it possible to reshape educational processes for all children. ■

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